

Branded

New York Times Writer Dexter Ford Reveals
The Secrets Behind the Car and Motorcycle Brands You Love

(originally published in *Motorcyclist Magazine*)

You're being manipulated. Yes, unique, freedom-loving, ruggedly independent you.

How do I know? Because, for the past 14 years, I've been one of the people manipulating you. From the time I left the *Motorcyclist* staff I worked for big-time ad agencies, nudging people into craving Lexuses, Mercedes-Benzes, and all kinds of other shiny toys. I learned the ins and outs of pulling your emotional strings, of getting you to want something so badly you can almost taste it—whether you need it or not. Got pretty good at it, too.

And I've come back from the dark side to whisper a few secrets. The main one being that motorcycle companies—all motorcycle companies—are in the business of mind control. They don't just want you to buy their products—they want you to love them. And the key to this mind control is a little thing called branding.

How Does It Feel?

The idea behind branding is that people make many of their buying decisions on an emotional basis—no matter how smart and rational they think they are. In a world where almost every product works really well, we tend to choose our motorcycles, our cars, our clothes and our sunglasses, not on how well they actually work and how much they cost, but on how we feel about their brands—and how their brands make us feel.

I know all about branding, because I've spent 14 years doing it. But like everybody else, it works on me too. I've got an old

sports car in the garage that cost me \$8500 seven years ago. It's worth all of \$6500 now. It has 107,000 miles on it, a crack in the dashboard and a dent in the right rear fender. But it's a Porsche, a red one, and a Turbo Porsche at that. And while a Mazda, or a Nissan, or any one of a dozen other cars might work just as well and go just as fast, this feels better to me. Because it's a Porsche. I know it's silly, but I even feel better about myself when I drive my Porsche.

Did I mention that it's a Porsche?

PorscheOakleyNikeAprilia

We routinely use brands to define ourselves, to tell the world how smart we are, how hip, how successful, how attractive. Instead of telling a stranger your name, your occupation, your home town or your astrological sign, you might as well say you're a "PorscheOakleyNikeAprilia", or a "HarleyChevyBudweiserLevis". It would tell them more about you.

Brands are not just easy ways to stitch together a personality. They're also a practical way to save time and energy. Nobody has the time to completely, objectively evaluate every product they buy. It's much easier to find a brand, decide that it fits you, and simply stick with it.

Blinded By The Right

In the motojournalism biz, we are mainly concerned with the left, rational side of the brain. We go out, ride everything, and tell you, honestly and objectively, how it really works. But there's one thing that's always missing when we publish a road test—and that one thing just may be what matters most to you. It's the brand, of course.

We at the big M are confronted by the conflict between objective testing and branding—between the left, rational side of the brain, and the right, emotional side—every time we test a

motorcycle with a strong brand. When we give a Harley, a Ducati or a BMW a negative review, we hear about it. Boy, do we. The letters and emails come in like rocket-propelled grenades—so far just figuratively, but we’re keeping the blinds closed just in case.

We’re routinely amazed at how nasty and emotional the responses are. I’ve had just about every aspect of my person and personality, from my sexual preference (boringly straight, and my daughter’s grateful), to my abundance of hair (hanging in there), to my weight (OK, got me there) to my mental health (what do you mean by that?) misrepresented, denigrated and vilified. One owners’ club appointed me The Antichrist in their monthly newsletter. And all because I had—and continue to have—the naive notion that if a motorcycle actually sucks, it’s my job and duty to tell you.

The violent emotional responses shouldn’t surprise me, though. Because when I criticize a certain bike, I know that to the disciples of its particular brand, I’m not talking about a product, a motorcycle, a machine. I’m talking about *them*. I might as well be saying that they’re pathetic losers, hung like hamsters, that their children sniff glue and probably aren’t theirs after all.

Getting Under Your Skin

So this branding is powerful stuff. It’s also very aptly named. You can see it in grimacing, ink-stained action at any tattoo parlor. Because the ultimate in branding is convincing somebody to love your company logo so much that they’ll pay to have it permanently etched—branded—into their skin.

Harley-Davidson, obviously, has this branding thing figured out. The H-D shield is, after all, the most-tattooed image in the history of the world. But it wasn’t always thus.

Not so long ago I, and a lot of other people, figured Harley-Davidson was a goner. Compared to their Japanese competition, Harleys were slow, shaky and crude—a decade or two behind the times. Their customers were few: outlaw bikers, middle-

American tourers and Elvis. Even outlaw bikers chose other machines. Remember the big, bad Harley Marlon Brando rode in *The Wild One*? Look again. It was a Triumph.

When Harley's executives bought the company back then, I shook my head. A Harley was never going to be as objectively worthy as, say, a Honda CBX. So how could people—lots of people—be convinced to buy them?

World's Biggest Gang

Well, the guys at Harley knew something I didn't. They knew they weren't selling motorcycles. They were selling a dream. A brand. They knew that recreating Harley wasn't about making their motorcycles faster, or cheaper, or more comfortable.

They took a struggling motorcycle maker and turned it into an exclusive club—the biggest motorcycle gang in history. To be sure, they made the motorcycles better—in part by adopting some of the manufacturing and quality control techniques pioneered by the Japanese. But they also knew that they could build an irresistible lifestyle around the Harley mystique, that they could make Harley an icon for freedom and toughness and America. And that they could then sell that icon, one bike, one piggy bank, one t-shirt at a time. Forever.

Think about it. Every Harley rider thinks of him or herself as a rebellious, rugged individual, doing his or her thing in his or her own rebellious, rugged way. And what do they do? Dress up in virtually identical black leather and denim getups, and ride the same motorcycles in great roaring packs to the same rallies, the same bars and burger joints, Sunday after Sunday. Just like all the other rebellious, rugged individuals.

Belt Buckles And Piggy Banks

Think Harley-Davidson is a motorcycle company? Harley's revenues last year were just under a billion dollars. With a "b". Not the revenues from selling motorcycles, which were also

huge. But just from selling accessories, parts, clothes and piggy banks.

You might be getting the idea that branding is a bad thing. Not so, hog breath. Branding helps us figure out who we are and who we want to be. And it helps us tell other people who we are—and who we want to be—in ways we otherwise couldn't.

People who buy Harley-Davidsons feel better about themselves. They are prouder, happier, more fulfilled. They may be more attractive to the opposite sex, even if the opposite sex's parents are not so amused. They may pay more, and wait longer, for a motorcycle with no better reliability, longevity or performance. But that's not the point. They don't want to go faster—they want to be a Harley person. And when it comes time to sell said Harley, they'll get a lot more of their money back. Because the next guy in line wants to be a Harley person just as much as they did.

Harley-Davidson is, after all, the second-oldest American motorcycle company—so might this Harley case study be a little misleading? Wasn't Harley always a great brand? Well, they were just as second-oldest in 1982—and the brand was dead in the water then. But just for the sake of argument, let's look at a more recent example of branding in action.

Instant Carma

In 1989, there was no such thing as a Lexus.

Toyota is a great car company—maybe the best in the world. But Americans didn't want to pay \$40,000 for a car that said "Toyota" on the trunk. So Toyota took a deep, inspired breath and created a brand from scratch, a brand designed to go head-to-head against Mercedes-Benz, the company that invented the freakin' automobile way back in 1886.

Toyota built some great Lexuses—cars that, in Japan and elsewhere, proudly carried the Toyota nameplate. But mostly they created a great brand. They didn't act like a cheerful,

diffident, eager-to-please Japanese car company. They acted like a big, impressive world-class luxury car company, with the engineering horsepower of Mercedes and the sheer, decadent luxury of Rolls Royce. They spent a lot of money on advertising—some of it really good advertising. They decided who they wanted to be, and set out to tell everybody. And they got their advertising money right back every time they sold a car. With lots of interest.

While a Toyota Camry sells for \$20,000 and change, a Lexus ES300, which is basically the same car, sells for over \$30,000—often way over \$30,000. Multiply that ten grand “Lexus tax” times 250,000 cars a year and you’ve got 2.5 *billion* dollars. Which can buy a lot of ads in *Motor Trend*, and *Esquire*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Even on the Superbowl. In just a couple years Lexus went from a gleam in a marketing guy’s eye to challenging Mercedes-Benz’s 106 years of heritage. How did they do it? Branding, my son. They created a brand, built the products to match, and stuck to it. They believed—so we believe.

The Smell of Fear

Other attempts at creating new brands have met with less success. Our beloved Honda launched Acura four years before Toyota launched Lexus and for those four years had the “Japanese Luxury” market to themselves. Won all kinds of awards, sold lots of nice cars. But when Lexus launched in 1990, their commitment to their brand blew Acura out of the water. Acura had what many regarded as the world’s best sports car at the time, the NSX. Lexus had four-door sedans. But in the branding wars, Lexus kicked butt. Why? Because they believed.

Acura couldn’t decide what it wanted to be. Luxury or performance? American, Japanese or European? Honda, or not Honda? The public abhors a brand that doesn’t know itself, that doesn’t have confidence in itself. If they sense your fear, they attack. Lexus showed confidence, Acura showed fear and indecision, and the rest is history. Lexus is now the largest-selling luxury brand in the U.S. While Acura, after 27 years of trying, and using essentially equal engineering resources, is still

struggling to separate itself from Honda in the public's hearts, minds and wallets. You know what Lexus stands for, because Lexus told you. Even Acura doesn't know what Acura stands for, so they sell fewer cars, for less money—cars that are essentially equal in quality and performance. They don't take their brand seriously—so they lose.

Looking For Love In All The Wrong Places

Back to motorcycles, and none too soon. Harley has obviously worked this branding thing like a rental Corvette. But what about the other motorcycle manufacturers? They can presumably read the business section, which means they must have seen how well Harley—and Harley's stockholders—have done. So have they followed Harley's lead in turning their businesses into brands—into emotional monuments and money-gushing geysers?

Well, no. Ducati is potentially a great, Ferrariable brand, but for now it's stuck in a low-volume, cultish niche. Without concerted, aggressive marketing and advertising—deciding who they want to be, and doing what it takes, including spending money, to tell the world—they'll stay a minor player. And make no mistake—every company wants to become bigger and bigger and bigger. Nobody wants to be a tiny niche player and stay a niche player, even if, as in the case of Ducati, that happens to be some of its charm right now. Business people don't invest in a company for their health, or because of its small-town innocence. They do it to make money, and there's no such thing as too much money, at least to an investor or a company executive. Call it greed, call it capitalism, it's all the same thing. And if you like motorcycles, you should understand that the better a company succeeds at being a business, *ie*, making money, the better they are going to be at surviving, and giving us the wonderful machines we all want to ride.

Aprilia is a prime example of great product without much of a brand—think of them as the Italian Victory. Triumph seems to be stuck between celebrating its heritage and building near-Japanese-level sport bikes and sport-tourers, doing neither well

enough to catch fire, so to speak. BMW does nice advertising, has some heritage to work with, and demands a premium price for its products. But historically, most of its machines are heavy and quirky, though their newer efforts—which are much more like the Japanese machines they compete against—are racking up sales while they are arguably diluting its brand. In any event, going to be a long time before the Rock Store parking lot needs a separate BMW section to go with the Harley compound.

Turning Japanese

That leaves the Japanese makers, who have pretty consistently failed to distinguish their brands from each other, let alone break out into becoming any kind of must-have social phenomenon.

All the Japanese brands stand for essentially the same things: performance, engineering, value. Which, if you ask me, will forever doom them to battling each other with ever-escalating performance, engineering and value, clawing for scraps on the ground while smart marketers like Harley sneak away with the whole carcass and drag it up into the crook of a nearby tree.

Part of it is cultural. Lexus—which was created, in large part, by Toyota's American sales arm—notwithstanding, Japanese companies seem to be dominated by engineers, who tend to downplay the impact branding and marketing can have on a company's success. Call it left-brain dominance. That's pretty ironic in the motorcycle business, considering that the Japanese are building the most exciting, best-performing vehicles the world has ever seen. They're not selling a necessary commodity, like cars or cornflakes, but rather selling fun, recreation, exhilaration—you'd think they'd find ways to make the marketing and advertising as captivating and emotional as the experience they're selling. But even the Germans are beating them at the emotion game, in both high-performance cars and motorcycles. And when the notoriously left-brained Krauts are kicking your butt at evoking emotion, you've got problems.

A Two-Wheeled Lexus?

Could Honda—or any of the others—take a deep breath and do their own two-wheeled Lexus? Not a luxury brand, of course, but an invented brand that would bypass the generic implications of being one of four barely distinguishable Japanese motorcycle makers? It would make perfect sense. Because in the huge, and obviously lucrative cruiser market especially, a Japanese name is as effective at killing desire as a turd in a hot tub. They try to dodge that truth by adding butch cruiser sub brands (Vulcan, Road Star, Shadow, Intruder), and by co-opting traditional styling cues (Kawasaki was making more convincing Indian replicas than Indian), but if it comes from Kawasaki, is sold by a Kawasaki salesman in a Kawasaki dealership filled with Kawasakis, and has to go back to the Kawasaki dealer for warranty service, it's a Kawasaki. The net result is that the Japanese makers are forced to sell generally superior cruisers for much less. And sell many fewer, put together, than Harley sells all by itself. The Japanese cruisers look and sound and feel like Harleys. But the only important thing is missing—that would be the brand.

A Japanese maker (or, as it is turning out, Polaris, an American company) *could* create a brand, the way Toyota created Lexus. It would require a long-term commitment—a real, emotional commitment, from one end of the corporation to the other. Not to mention lots of money. But it could be done.

Forward Into The Past

If one wanted to take a shorter, less risky route, however, there is one brand out there, packed up and ready for shipment, that could challenge Harley at its own game. That brand, of course, is Indian—which Polaris is now unveiling as its own separate, unique brand.

Harley was the second American motorcycle. Indian was the first. And for the first 50 years of its life, Indian went toe to toe with Harley. Indian won the Isle of Man. Won the first Daytona.

Carried thousands of American troops to war. And battled Harley, tooth and nail, in the hearts and minds of American riders. The name Indian still turns heads, even among people who don't even ride motorcycles.

Because it's such a strong brand, the Indian name has been bought, sold and wrestled over, time and time again, since the original company went under in 1953. Like Harley-Davidson, Indian has been owned by people who probably shouldn't have owned it. And the brand has been tarnished recently by the sudden bankruptcy forced upon it by its gonad-free financial backers. But like Harley-Davidson, Indian is a brand—a true world brand, on the level of Mercedes-Benz and Ferrari—that can, and should, rise again.

Feeling the Love

Indian didn't go belly-up back in 2003 because people didn't love the brand. The day the beancounters pulled the plug, Indian was selling more motorcycles than Ducati, Triumph and Aprilia combined. They had a terrific '04 product line, with hundreds of improvements and some truly eye-catching new models. The demand was there, even for a line of motorcycles based on the architecture of their archrival, Harley-Davidson. Production and management were the problems—making enough motorcycles, well enough, fast enough, to keep enough money moving through the pipeline. When Indian was cold-cocked the last time, Victory was making much better motorcycles and selling them for much less. But Indian, with higher prices, worse product and a much smaller ad budget, was outselling Victory by a margin of two to one. Why? The brand, paleface. A fact that Polaris executive seem to have taken to heart. And to wallet.

If I Owned A Hammer

If I had been on the board at Harley I would have taken a collection around the table, scraped up the current asking price of \$10,000,000 or so, and bought the Indian brand name in a heartbeat. For two very good reasons.

One, as I said, Indian is the only brand in the world that can beat Harley at its own All-American game. And if I were Harley, I wouldn't want to find myself fighting a fierce, well-financed competitor who had both the technological wherewithal to make better bikes and the branding horsepower to actually make people want them.

Two: the Harley phenomenon may go on forever, but certainly not at the pace it's maintained for the last 20 years. The bikes are selling well, but to older and older riders. And pretty soon, everybody who wants one will have one. Or three. I believe there's plenty of room in the world for a new Harley. A Harley with a different flavor, a Harley aimed not at the black-jacket-and-studs crowd, but the more casual, more laid-back, bomber-jacket crowd. A luxury Harley—a slightly kinder, slightly gentler Harley. In other words, Indian. If I were Harley, I would suspect that somewhere down the road there has to be a new Harley, in terms of sheer marketing momentum. And if I could own that Next Big Thing, or something that threatens to be that, for a relative pittance, I would have done it yesterday.

American Indian

But if Harley was not smart enough to buy Indian when they could—and the bankruptcy court's asking price of \$10 million was less than one day's revenue for Harley—I know some other companies that should have been.

Polaris, nearly eight years after this was first written, might as well been playing by this very script as they relaunch Indian today.

Recruit a team of great American designers, engineers and marketers, and let them disappear for a couple years. Have them crank out a few kick-ass Indian models and a great branding and marketing campaign. Then launch the new Indian the way General Motors launched Saturn: as an independent, scrappy, All-American Brand.

In the advertising and P.R., I'd emphasize the noble struggle to keep a Great American Company alive. I'd get people emotionally involved with the effort. I'd find ways to connect Indian fans with Indian, blurring the line between the brand and the customers. I'd get the fans to feel they were part of a team, get the public pulling for Indian to succeed. And I'd keep it feeling as grass-roots, down-home and American as possible.

The Company Behind The Curtain

If pressed, I'd portray the effort as a noble tribute—one great motorcycle company helping another—not unlike the way Bill Gates and Microsoft stepped up to help Apple when the MacSters were in a jam.

I'd set up truly separate dealerships that look and feel, not like Japanese or Victory stores, but like Indian stores—vintage gas pumps outside, the works. The last Indian had no trouble finding dealers. Can you imagine how eager current dealers—or anybody else with a brain—would be to sell the best of both worlds: a brand as strong as Harley with the technology, production skills and financial resources of an American maker like Victory or the Japanese?

The O'Hagan Factor

Fran O'Hagan was the head of marketing and new-product development for Indian before it folded the last time in 2003. He's a smart guy, a dedicated GSX-R1000 rider, and has worked for big-time brands including Jaguar and BMW cars. Before the money and the clueless investors ran out, he saw Indian as having the potential to be not just a major force, but a dominant force in the world motorcycle market. Because he knew that if he could create the capacity to build motorcycles as well and as efficiently as Honda or Polaris, and do it with a brand as strong as Indian, he could the Japanese's left-brained butts. He once told me he felt sorry for Honda, and where they would be in the next five years.

Well, Honda already *has* the capacity to build like Honda. So do the other Japanese builders, as well as Polaris and other makers like Triumph. That's the hard part. All they need is the brand—and the commitment and maturity to not let it be confused with their current brands, such as they are. They would just have to be grownups about it, and not mess it up.

Revenge of the right

Would some people know, intellectually, that an Indian made by somebody else was not quite an Indian? Sure. But in a naturalized, let's-celebrate-diversity sort of way. Americans have little patience for other cultures, but we're perfectly willing to accept other people into *our* culture if they're willing to make the effort to look, sound and act like us. If The New Indian did their branding right, built the great products the brand deserves, and did it with real dedication and commitment, very few people would really care. When the left brain and the right brain disagree, you see, the right brain wins every time. Think about it. Which guy takes the hot girl home from the bar: the smart, kind, sensitive guy they'll actually enjoy being with, or the flashy, cocky guy who can spin a good line of BS—the one with three other girlfriends?

Achtung, Alabama

Remember that this is a world in which Ducati is owned by Germans, Mercedes-Benzes are made in Alabama, BMWs are made in South Carolina, Chevy Impalas are made in Canada, Porsches are made in Finland, Italian Aprilias are powered by Austrian engines and Toyotas race in NASCAR. The Mini, that icon of essential Britishness, is made by BMW. Land Rovers, which used to be powered by old Buick engines, were later powered by old BMW engines, and are now powered by old Jaguar engines. Jaguar was owned by Ford and Saab was owned by GM. And Jeep, which so proudly helped defeat the Germans in World War II, was once owned by Daimler, who powered the Messerschmitts that killed our soldiers driving those Jeeps. The

lesson here is that it's not important who builds a thing and where it is built—if you play your cards right, the important thing, let me hear it one more time, is the brand.

Is it better that either Polaris, Honda, Yamaha, Kawasaki or Suzuki, already good motorcycle companies, revives Indian? Or perhaps you'd prefer a clueless group of Beantown bean counters, who fired all Indian's workers in a day and flushed the brand down the john like a dead goldfish? I'll take a good, existing motorcycle maker any day.

All For The Good Of The Country?

Could Honda—or Polaris, or any of the other Japanese makers—do this? Yes—but only if they learn to get serious about this branding thing. They'd have to keep it rigorously independent from their current motorcycle bureaucracy, with its own headquarters, management, marketing people, PR people and ad agency. If they did, it would be good for them, good for American motorcycling, good for the U.S. economy, and good for the heritage and legacy of a great American motorcycle company. For all those reasons, I hope one does. They should.

12-Step Program

Whew. I hope this has given you a little more insight into why people—even you—want what they want, and don't want what they don't. And if you've bought a Lexus, Mercedes, Infiniti, Acura or Nissan Z in the past few years and don't like it, I'm really sorry. They all seemed pretty swell to me when I was writing the ads and brochures.

OK, I feel better now. I've gotten that off my chest. They say that to have a complete recovery, first you have to go back and apologize to everyone you've hurt along the way.

Well, I'm off to the garage. Got to finish rebuilding that old Harley Sportster; the one right next to that tatty, wonderful Turbo Porsche. Did I mention that it's a Porsche?